

Cultural Competence in the Writing Center: Partnering with  
Students of Color in Writing Through Understanding

**Introduction**

DePaul University is committed to its Vincentian principles and namesake in blatantly measurable ways. One way it's doing so, in keeping with its ethos of making quality education attainable and accessible for vulnerable populations, for the 2010/2011 academic year 4 out of 10 incoming freshmen were from non-majority ethnic groups. What's equally encouraging is that out of that number, 25% were Latino/Hispanic or African American. Although these numbers are impressive, what still remains are the high attrition rates for these students (Vision Twenty12, 2009).

Attrition or lack of persistence to graduation can be attributed to a number of variables. Factors involved can range from a lack of academic preparation to the anxieties correlated to adjusting to a new environment and the changes germane to it. Other less obvious obstacles to completion could be part of the social make up of the institutions, its student body—if primarily homogenous, and real or perceived instances of racial discrimination (Nora & Cabrera, 1996).

Racial discrimination though often depicted as such, if not caricatured as such, isn't always deliberate nor is it always malicious in intent. Sometimes racism or racist overtures can be quite innocuous, yet the effects can be just as devastating as those that are deliberately engaged in (Solarzano, D., Ceja, M. & Yosso, T., 2000). These acts, for the intent of this paper will be referred to as microaggressions. Microaggressions, for the purposes of this study are being defined, as advanced by Solorzano (2000) as "...subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously" (p. 60).

Academia, the funnel that our brightest and best pass through in order to fill the role of tomorrow's leadership positions, seems to be losing many of its darker hued constituents to attrition. Whereas the focus of this paper isn't to address attrition directly, but to identify ways in which academic support, specifically writing centers, can eliminate microaggressions and partner with underrepresented ethnic populations to help bolster their writing, which is

integral to academic success, and thereby—indirectly positively affect university attrition rates. This partnering, by and large, can be facilitated through cultural competence, which takes into consideration the diverse backgrounds, along with those unique norms and mores, and ways of being in the world germane to writers of color.

### **The Necessity for Allies**

Writing centers have been erected on U.S. colleges and university campuses for decades. Their presence, ideally, exists to partner with students, faculty, staff, and alumni with the goal of producing better writers who will subsequently produce better writing. U.S. colleges and universities, for the most part, are microcosms of the broader social strata and often find themselves explicitly homogenous. It's in this monocultural milieu that, unbeknownst to the administrators, educators, academic support services, and the students themselves that microaggressions may be occurring. For example, a Latina student may be complimented on how well she speaks and or writes English. Although the intention may be one of a

compliment, the inference is that those coming from her ethnic background don't generally speak or write English well.

Students of color may find themselves at odds with the alien culture they encounter in predominantly white schools. This can often be magnified when assignments are meted out with grading rubrics that aren't culturally competent (Fox, 2003). These writers arrive at writing centers, assignment in hand, looking for assistance in negotiating what they know (which is so intertwined with who they are) and strategies on how to translate that, effectively, into what their assignments—hence their professors, require. The writing center, although traditionally a maverick element within academe, may still hold allegiances to dominant culture's normative standards of writing and language that may alienate those populations whose prose doesn't employ those conventions or mores. It's in this context that writing tutors and writing center administration may find an opportunity to become allied with such students helping them to not only traverse the murky waters of academic writing, but

also find value, significance and meaning in their native way of making sense in and of the world.

African Americans, for example, though coming from a variety of backgrounds, typically have a social commonality that exists amongst this population (Carroll, 2010; James Myers, 2006). Traditionally, African Americans, though cultured in Western educational systems, emerge from and may return to social and cultural paradigms consistent with those of blacks throughout the Diaspora. These constructs consist of collective identities contrasted with notions of individualism, so applauded in the academy, which can be problematic when individual understanding of text is required. In addition to ways in which the self is conceptualized, which invariably informs and influences the ways that written discourse transpires, the language required in academic writing can be quite alien to the uninitiated; the profane. Fox posits, "...'good academic writing' is socially and culturally constructed by scholars who are both narrow in their vision and exclusionary about their club" (Fox, 2003). Moreover, the attitude of the

writing tutor can help to reinforce this elitist club, participate in its undoing, or help the writer foreign to these frameworks negotiate successfully through what's required while achieving their individual goals.

### **A Conceptualization of Culture**

On March 4, 2006, DePaul University, with a unanimous vote from its board of trustees, launched Goal Twenty12, a mission that would cast the vision for the following 6 years. The plan outlines 6 goals: 1. Enrich academic quality 2. Prepare students to be socially responsible future leaders and engaged alumni 3. Be a model for diversity 4. Selectively increase enrollment 5. Strengthen financial position 6. Further institutionalize DePaul's Vincentian and Catholic identity. For our purposes, Goal III: Be a model for diversity, is of significance. Diversity can be described and measured in a number of ways. Some look at gender, sexual orientation, ethnic origins, religious philosophy, physical or mental imparities, etc when defining diversity. It was important to explore ethnic or culturally diversity for this study.

What is culture? There are a number of ways to define culture, however, for simplicity sake and for the sake of

this study, in the spirit of the late educator Asa Hilliard, quoting Brazilian educator and theorist, Paulo Friere, culture is "anything that humans make" (Hilliard, 1995). Fundamentally, he draws a distinction between what is innate and what is a construct of human ingenuity. Culture, a way of being and doing things uniquely human, is an externalized construct. And these constructs vary amongst populations.

DePaul University, by virtue of its Vincentian character, seeks to attract people of varying cultures to become a part of its community. Integration is a complicated process requiring willingness by the parties involved, especially those who hold dominance and thereby are equated with power. The University Center for Writing Based Learning, an extension of the University, finds itself in a unique position to help facilitate the diversity imagined by its administrators while concomitantly lending a hand to help mitigate the attrition of the University's most vulnerable populations: those students, who self identify as Hispanic/Latino and African American. Cultural competence can employ a willingness to understand the individual, within their unique cultural context.

This can be facilitated through dialogue and inquiry, allowing space for honest communiqué.

How is the Writing Center perceived by those students of color that are a part of the University community? Do they view it as a place that is welcoming to people who aren't part of the predominant racial makeup? Do they find diversity in the advertisements, in the staff, or in the overall presentation of the UCWbl? And depending on what they discover, does it make a difference in how they receive the services offered?

### **Methods**

In an effort to obtain a general sense of the perception related to diversity, acceptance, and or microaggressions in the University Center for Writing Based Learning, I devised a simple 6 question survey and sent it to 830 members of the University community, who identify themselves as either minority or underrepresented students and/or faculty. The questions were:

1. Have you ever used the DePaul University Center for Writing Based Learning (UCWbl)?;
2. If yes, how was your experience?

If no, was



there a particular reason why?; 3. If yes, do you feel like your cultural background was taken into consideration during your consultation (e.g. your sentence structure; the way that you were greeted; the feedback you received, etc...)?; 4. What are your thoughts on the diversity or lack of diversity in the Writing Center?; 5. As a student of color, do you feel that DePaul University, institutionally, is supportive of your ethnic background?; 6. Which Writing Center location was your consultation held at (i.e. Lincoln Park, Loop Campus, Lincoln Park Outpost-Library, Loop Outpost-Adult Student Center, Feedback by Email, or IM/Chat)?

Utilizing email lists secured with approval from the University's Office of Multicultural Success, the African Centered Worldview Alumni Group, and the School for New Learning with minority codes designated for African American, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, and Islander.

I would categorize responses in 1. Utilized the UCWbl 2. Not Utilized 3. Felt positive about diversity 4. Felt negative about diversity 5. Felt indifferent and 6. Felt positive about

DePaul University's approach to handling matters of race.

### **Results**

Out of the 830 email surveys, 50 responded. Out of the 50 that responded, 32 had a personal experience with the UCWbl. Out of the 32 respondents, 10 felt that there was a lack of diversity in the center and that worked as a negative factor for them, 7 felt very good about the racial makeup or felt like it didn't matter because of the good service they received; 3 was uncertain; and 12 were indifferent or provided ambiguous feedback.

### **Discussion**

Given the nature of the study, its aim, and the ultimate data that was gathered, our findings are somewhat inconclusive. Although roughly 30% of respondents felt there were issues, in terms of cultural competence, these were self-reported, out of a relatively small sample, which may not accurately communicate what's happening with the broader population of students of color. Furthermore, the data finding that 29% felt as though culture or ethnicity didn't play a negative role in their tutoring sessions may be equally as problematic.

The initial goal was to identify if the Writing Center was meeting the needs of students of color, by fostering an understanding of the unique cultures that writers come from and partnering with them in an effort to help them develop as writers. My research suggests that there is certainly more room for diversity in the staff, at least from the perspective of some writers, specifically those of Hispanic descent and of African descent. However, there appears to be a relatively high satisfaction rate with the currently delivered service. There still needs to be more research done, possibly employing different methods (e.g. focus groups, convenience surveys, and/or naturalistic observations).

## References:

Amaury, N. & Cabrera, A. (1996). The role of perceptions of prejudice and discrimination on the adjustment of minority students to college. *Journal of Higher Education*, 67(2).

Retrieved from

<http://alumna.brynmawr.edu/diversitycouncil/documents/Nora.pdf>.

Cabrera, A., Amaury, N., Terezini, P., Pascarella, L., & Serra Hagedorn, L. (1999). Campus racial climate and the adjustment of students to college: a comparison between white student and African-American students. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 70(2). 134-160. Retrieved from

<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy1.lib.depaul.edu/sici?sici=0022-1546%281999%2970%3A2%3C134%3ACRCATA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-T&origin=serialsolutions&>.

Davila, B. (2006). Rewriting race in the writing center. *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, 31(1), 1-5. Retrieved from

<http://writinglabnewsletter.org/archives/v31/31.1.pdf>.

DePaul University, (2009). *Vision Twenty12 in Action*.

Retrieved from

[president.depaul.edu/Downloads/20112InAction12209.pdf](http://president.depaul.edu/Downloads/20112InAction12209.pdf)

DiPardo, A. (1992). Whispers of coming and going: Lessons from Fannie. In R.W. Barnett & J.S. Blumner (Eds), *The Longman*

*guide to writing center theory and practice* (pp. 350-367). New York, NY: Pearson Longman

Drake-Brassfield, C. (2008). An analysis of African centered psychology, diversity, and cultural trends using the social theory model. *American journal of psychological research*, 4(10), 29-36.

Hilliard, A. (1995). Teachers and cultural styles in a pluralistic society. In A. Hilliard's (Ed) *The Maroon Within Us* (pp. 168-177). Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press

Fox, H. (2003). Being an ally. In C. Shroeder, H. Fox, & P. Bizzell (Eds), *Alternative discourses and the academy*.

Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann/Boynton Cook. Retrieved from

<http://www-personal.umich.edu/~hfox/racepic.html>.

James Myers, L. (2006). Mental health strategies to eliminate health disparities: towards the creation of a climate and culture of optimal health from an African (indigenous) American perspective. *DePaul Journal of Health Law* 10(1), 73-88.

Retrieved from

<http://heinonline.org.ezproxy2.lib.depaul.edu/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/dephcl10&collection=journals&page=73#81>.

Solorzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: the experiences of African American college students. *Journal of Negro education*, 69(1,2), 60-73. Retrived from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2696265>.

Wallace, B. C. & Constantine, M.G. (2005). Africentric cultural values, psychological help-seeking attitudes, and self-concealment in African American college students. *Journal of Black psychology* 31(4), 369-385. doi:10.1177/0095798405281025